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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews ways in which animals have been used in a therapeutic way with disturbed persons and suggests that animals may help to reduce anxiety and reestablish the socialization process with autistic children and their parents. An etiological study is described of the verbal and nonverbal behavior of four disturbed children (9-11 years old) with hamsters. Child-animal interaction was observed during classroom free play. Analysis of 30-minute sessions examined language functions, conversational acts, social behavior, gestures, distance between child and animal, and eye contact. Changes from first to last sessions were noted, including increases in emotional and personal functions, gestures, and physical contact. Distance between the child and animal decreased. (CL)

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CHILD'S MODES OF COMMUNICATION
WITH THE ANIMAL

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WINNIPEG, OCTOBER 1984
CHILD IN SOCIAL CONTEXT CONFERENCE

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It may seem strange, within the context of a conference regarding the understanding of the intellectual and emotional needs of children and their families, to bring up the role that animals can play in the development of the child, and in doing so, to talk about the child's modes of communication with animals.

Since ancient times, animals played an important part in man's life, whether it was to feed him, to help him at his work, to be his companion or to represent the terrifying forces of nature. The first Gods were animals and certain tribes believed, and still do, that they descend from animal ancestors. If we think of the animal court proceedings which took place during the Middle Ages, the demarcation between animals and man seemed not too precise. However, modern man seems to protect himself against the intrusion of animals into his life and doing so, has denied his own animal nature. He has done this by instituting laws in cities which forbid the presence of an animal, however small, in buildings and hospitals for sanitary reasons. He laughs at the sight of a woman fondling her cat as though it were a baby and doesn't even wonder about the role that this inferior creature could play in the development of a child or the adjustment of an individual.

However, in the last few years, in keeping with the growing interest in a better balance between man and nature, animals are being looked at in a new light and we are now seeing a virtual proliferation of articles or research centers whose purpose is to study animals and the effect they have on man.

Among others, let us mention the Human Companion Research Group of the University of Windsor and the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the Veterinary School of the University of Pennsylvania.

It would seem that animals can give back to psychiatric patients, the elderly and people with heart disease alike, a sense of worth, self-respect and responsibility which are so vital to man. Corson (1977) writes: "The attachment humans develop for pet dogs may be related to two prominent qualities of many dogs: their ability to offer love and tactile reassurance without criticism and their maintenance of a sort of perpetual infantile innocent dependence that may stimulate our natural tendency to offer support and protection".

Beck and Katcher (1983) stress the symbolic satisfaction of human needs through animals; the permissive attitude adopted towards the animal in regards to his eating habits, urinating or his mating appear to be a way in which to meet the unconscious needs of man, needs which are highly regulated by society.

Freud himself wrote to a friend, "...it really explains why one can love an animal...with such an extraordinary intensity: attention without ambivalence, the simplicity of a life free from the almost unbearable conflicts of civilisation, the beauty of an existence complete in itself...".

The study of the beneficial effects or the absence of them due to the presence of an animal in common everyday life or in extraordinary circumstances (such as life in a psychiatric hospital) requires more extensive

research into what is felt, or what goes on in a relationship between a person and an animal. Furthermore, as Corson points out, certain types of animals...for example, some types of dogs correspond to certain types of people just as other types correspond to others.

Most extensive research presents various difficulties inherent in all field studies; it also comes up against the resistance of certain milieus which consider it heresy to even contemplate the possibility that animals might play a role in the emotional life of a human being.

On the other hand, an excess of enthusiasm can be dangerous, in that it can make one forget the need to verify the hypotheses which emerge and to recognize the limits of such an approach.

For this conference and its specific concerns, about children's needs and social policy, we must not forget the incidence noted by Heiman (1965), Ryder (1973), Schmitt and Kempe (1975) of the beneficial presence of an animal in the well-being of children; families who have a pet have less tendency to "abuse" children because the animal acts as a scapegoat, thus allowing conflicts to be resolved.

For the autistic child as well, animals provide a change in the environment and an initial contact with reality. When he was awarded the Nobel prize, Tinbergen (1974), in his speech, emphasized the importance of the environment and the stress experienced by parents and their children when the first symptoms of autism appear. The most successful therapeutic approaches would be those that attempt to reduce anxiety and to re-establish the socialization process.

It is within this framework that animals fit in; in order to understand the modes of interaction and their evolution, and to see where the changes are, if any, the ethological model provides the essential framework. This model is characterized by the precise observation of the behaviour of the subjects.

Our study was limited to the verbal and non-verbal communication of 4 children with hamsters. These animals were chosen because the school authorities did not want other animals, such as cats or dogs, to be introduced among the children.

The present study is certainly not enough; it must be pursued and completed through further observations. However it does provide us with a preliminary analysis. This analysis of verbal communication was carried out according to a functional, pragmatic model of analysis of communication as suggested by Halliday (1975) and Dore (1977).

Different functions, such as regulatory function (which serves to control the behaviour of others), interactional function, different conversational acts (requests, descriptions, statements, etc.) are defined by the authors. We may well ask whether an analytical tool designed for the study of communication between humans and young children is adequate for the study of communication between a child and an animal.

There appear to be fewer problems in the area of non-verbal communication. McGrew (1972), using methods applied in the study of animals to a study of the social behaviour of children between the ages of 3 and 4, distinguishes agonistic, nonagonistic and quasiagonistic behaviour according

to the social or aggressive nature of the children's gestures. Furthermore, the distance between the child and the animal (Hall, 1959), the intermittent or continuous eye contact with the animal are examined.

It would be interesting to see, at a later stage, whether the child uses the same acts of communication with adults or whether he allows himself, with an animal, to behave in a way in which he would not dare with an adult.

Therefore, it is the children and the analysis of verbal and non-verbal communication which are presented to you here. For now, the objective of this exploratory study is to compare the range of the verbal and non-verbal repertory of the children during the first and the last session. It is important to analyse this repertory in order to understand better what goes on in the relationship with the animal and its therapeutic effect.

Method

The sample consisted of 4 school aged children (2 boys and 2 girls) whose ages ranged between 9 and 11. They attended a school for emotionally disturbed children. They were chosen among a group of children showing the best performance at school. The 4 children had been attending this school since September, 1981. They came from a middle-class socio-economic background. The first subject was a boy of 11, who, at the time of his enrollment to the school was mildly retarded and behaved in a aggressive manner towards his peers which resulted in rejection and isolation in class. The second boy was 9; he was found to be lacking in initiative to become

involved with the other children of whom he seemed to be afraid. His behaviour was characterized by anxiety, insecurity and a lack of self-confidence. The third subject was a 10 year old girl who seemed to get along well with her peers because of her liveliness and good humour. However, because of her limited communicative skills, she had difficulty maintaining such relationships. This child also had a limited attention span and difficulty with concentration; as a result, she carried out tasks slowly. The fourth subject, a girl of 9, shared the above characteristics. In addition, she was extremely nervous, hypersensitive, lacked self-confidence and was a slow learner. In spite of the fact that she had attended this school for over 2 years, she was just beginning to socialize with her peers. In brief, all 4 children experienced, at varying degrees, difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

The child-animal interaction was observed in class during periods of free time. Each child was filmed individually for 30-minute periods every 2 weeks. The total observation time for each subject was 180 minutes. No precise instructions were given to the child; he and he alone looked after the hamsters during this half hour. The only limits put down were that he does not harm the animals.

Methods of Analysis

As previously mentioned, the analysis of the verbal repertory related to language functions (Halliday, 1975) and conversational acts (Dore, 1977) was performed.

The non-verbal repertory was analyzed on the basis of social

behaviour, gestures (McGrew, 1972), the distance between the child and the animal (Hall, 1959) and eye contact.

The definitions and examples of the different aspects studied are in appendix.

Analysis of Results and Discussion

As can be seen by looking at the various tables, certain changes occur. These changes will be discussed further on.

On the verbal level, whereas regulatory function was very important during the initial contact with the animal, personal function subsequently become more important (see Table 1). The same is true of conversational acts; there are few emotional reactions at first but later on they increase considerably (Table 2).

But globally, verbalizations decrease since the total fall from 155 to 95. However, this decrease is not the result of the drop of all children but only accentuated on one child. Furthermore, on the non-verbal level, more gestures are observed mostly during the last session, particularly the picking up, putting down the animal and kissing it. A decrease in the distance between the child and the animal is also observed (that is, an increase in the categories of "very close" and "close", see Table 5) as well as more quasiagonistic behaviours, once again due to only one child, are displayed.

Generally speaking, it can be said that there is a greater frequency of physical contact, while on the verbal level, emotional reactions

take precedence over the more rigid controls the child impose.

Perhaps this is the starting point for better socialization, the beginnings of interpersonal exchange, a way to express oneself symbolically and to relive one's infancy - a time when tactile contact is so important.

This study is not extensive enough to draw definitive conclusions but this research leads us to great possibility of investigation and sensibilization of the importance and the effects of the relationship between the child and the animal.

We could examine if the presence of a pet play an important role in the stability of the family, in the hospital or at school, if the companionship of the animal help the child in need (abused children, child going through the stress of the divorce etc.)

Table 1

LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

	<u>1rst session</u>		<u>6th session*</u>	
	N	%	N	%
Instrumental function	--		--	
Regulatory function	72	46,45%	26	27,36%
Interactional function	52	33,54	33	34,73%
Personal function	28	18,06%	34	35,78%
Heuristic function	1	0,64%	0	--
Imaginative function	2	1,29%	2	2,10%
T	155		95	

*The 6th session is the last session.

Table 2

CONVERSATIONAL ACTS

	1rst session		6th session	
	N	%	N	%
Requests	65	41,93%	30	31,57%
Responses	--		--	
Descriptions	17	10,96%	11	11,57%
Statements	23	14,83%	6	6,31%
Acknowledgments	--		--	
Organizational devices	25	16,12	9	9,47%
Performatives	--		5	5,26%
Emotional reactions	25	16,12%	34	35,78%
T	155		95	

Table 3

NON VERBAL BEHAVIOURS

	1rst session		6th session	
	N	%	N	%
AGONISTIC				
a) aggressive	-	-	-	-
b) fearful	13	1,86%	4	0,45%
c) defensive	25	3,57%	14	1,56%
QUASIAGONISTIC	-	-	46	5,12%
NON AGONISTIC	662	94,57%	834	92,87%
T	700		898	

Table 4**GESTURES**

	<u>1rst session</u>		<u>6th session</u>	
	N	%	N	%
Pat	30	10,71%	41	9,25%
Pick Up	12	4,28%	163	36,79%
Put Down	7	2,5%	55	12,41%
Extend Hand	83	29,64%	101	22,8%
Extend Finger	27	9,64%	11	2,48%
Extend an object toward the animal	120	42,86%	41	9,25%
Hold in Hands on the Table	1	0,36%	12	2,27%
Hold on Arm in a Sweater	-	-	5	1,13%
Kiss	-	-	14	3,16%
T	280		443	

Table 5

Distance Between Child and Animal

	1rst session	6th session
Very Close (0 - 6 in)	2	44
Close (8 - 12 in)	92	293
Within (12 - 20 in)	556	487
Neutral ¹ (20 - 36 ¹ in)	44	65
Neutral ² (3 ft - 25 ft)	6	2
Open Space (5 ft - 8 ft)	1	-

Table 6

EYE CONTACT

Frequency according to the degree at the 1st and 6th session

	1rst session	6th session
Intermittent	69	88
Continuous	424	468
Averted	187	335

Annexe 1

Definitions and examples of language functions¹

Regulatory function: It is the function of language as controlling the behaviour of others. The regulatory is the "do as I tell you" function of language.

e.g. "Go there"
"Come in"

Interactional function: This is the "me and you" function of language. This is language used by the child to interact with those around him.

e.g. "What do you want?" "You don't want any?" (the child wants to take care of the animal).

Personal function: This is language used to express the child's own uniqueness, his awareness of himself, his feelings (interest, pleasure, disgust...), his emotions. This is the "here I come" function.

e.g. all the emotional reactions = "Ah! ah!"

Heuristic function: This is the "tell me why" function; This is the whole range of questioning forms used by the child exploring the environment.

e.g. Pierrot? Pierrot? (the name given to the hamster).

Imaginative function: This is the "let's pretend" function. This is the function whereby the child creates an environment of his own.

e.g. "I am going to make you a nice bed"
"Nic and Pic going up in a balloon"

¹ Definitions have been taken from HALLIDAY, M.A.K. (1975). Learning how to mean: Explorations in the development of language. London: Edward Arnold.

Annexe 2

Definitions and examples of conversational acts¹

Requests solicit information or action.

e.g. "What do you want?" "Do you want some?" "Come on, come on now"

Descriptions express observable (verifiable) facts, past or present.

e.g. "You don't have any more food"

Statements express facts, rules, attitudes, feelings, beliefs.

e.g. "You don't want to come" "I caught you"

Organizational devices regulate contact and conversation.

e.g. "Look" "Miquette" (the child calls the animal by the name given to it)

Performatives accomplish facts by being said.

e.g. "Watch out"

Emotional reactions: sounds of laughter, they cry out, songs, exclamations, noises with their mouth.

¹ Definitions have been taken from COLE, M., DORE, J., HALL, W.S., DOWLEY, G. (1978). Situation and task in young children's talk. Discourse processes, 1, 119-176.

The category "Emotional reactions" is from us.

Annexe 3

Definitions and examples of non verbal behaviors¹

Agonistic behavior which consists of:

- a) Fearful behavior: behavior by the aggressed-against child which reduces damages.
e.g. fright shown by the facial expression.
- b) Defensive behavior: behavior by an aggressed-against child which prevents an aggressor's attack from being completed.
e.g. the child quickly withdraws his hand or finger.
- c) Aggressive behavior: which normally produces injury.

Quasiagonistic behavior was defined as vigorous, gross activity which does not result in injury.

e.g. the child throws the animal back into the cage, the child drops the animal in the cage.

Nonagonistic behavior which consists of "peacefull" behavior.

e.g. the child pats the animal, he looks after the animal appropriately.

¹ Definitions have been taken from MCGREW, W.G. (1972). An ethological study of children behavior. New York: Academic Press.

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